



Washington State Department of Agriculture News Release

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WSDA's Weights & Measures, AAA offer tips to keep gas costs down

OLYMPIA – As the summer travel season begins and motorists start making vacation plans, the Washington State Department of Agriculture and AAA Washington urge drivers to watch gas pumps carefully to make sure they get their money's worth.

Washington vehicles consume more than 3 billion gallons of gas a year. With gas prices at record levels, motorists want to be reassured they're getting what they pay for.

"Our inspectors test thousands of meters at gas stations and check the quality of fuel on an unannounced basis in an effort to protect consumers at the pump," said Jerry Buendel, manager of the Washington State Department of Agriculture's (WSDA) Weights and Measures Program.

In 2004, the agency's nine inspectors tested more than one-third of the gasoline pumps in the state. On average they found problems with about 12 percent of the 22,000 meters tested. About 60 percent of the problems were for improper measurements. The remaining problems were mechanical in nature such as leaking hoses or malfunctioning displays.

Inspectors test the meters by using methods developed by the National Conference on Weights and Measures. In addition to pumping the fuel into precisely calibrated measuring containers, they inspect the devices to ensure they are correctly calculating the charges and that the pump's safety features are in place.

Measurement tolerances are very strict, Buendel said. To pass, the pumps must deliver within 0.5 percent of the quantity tested to pass. For example, on a 10-gallon purchase, the total must be within 6.4 fluid ounces of the amount delivered – that's slightly more than half the amount in a regular can of soda.

When inspectors find a gas pump that is shorting the customer, they order the device out of service and require that the station have the device repaired before using that meter again. Buendel emphasized that the inspector's mission is to not only protect the public, but to promote fair competition among businesses.

"In some cases, we find pumps dispensing too much fuel," said Buendel. "When that occurs, we let the station continue using the pump, but notify the business so they can get it repaired."

When it comes to octane levels, Washington drivers are getting what they pay for. WSDA began a testing program in 1991 and found a compliance rate of 72 percent. In 2004, compliance was at 95 percent, and all of the regular, unleaded fuel tested met quality standards. According to Buendel, the program is an effective deterrent to those attempting to sell low-quality fuel to Washington consumers.

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According to AAA Washington, the average price of self-serve, regular gasoline in Washington is \$2.403. Even though gas prices have decreased lately, the average price of gasoline is about 11 cents higher than a year ago.

Motorists can take some precautions to make sure they aren't overpaying at the pump:

- Make sure the display is set to zero before pumping any gas.
- Make sure the correct price or any discounts you qualify for are reflected in the price before you start filling your tank.
- Check the price by multiplying the number of gallons by the unit price and check your receipt before you leave the station.
- Make sure you are using the proper grade of fuel. Most cars run on regular or 87 octane fuel and don't need the higher octane, more expensive grades. Check your owner's manual for vehicle requirements.

AAA statistics show that the average vehicle is driven about 12,000 miles a year, using about 550 gallons of gas annually. More than half of all households in the United States own two or more vehicles. To get the best fuel efficiency, AAA suggests:

- Consolidate trips and errands to cut down on drive time and miles.
- Slow down. The faster you go, the more fuel you burn.
- Avoid jackrabbit starts.
- Lighten the load. Don't haul extra weight in your trunk, cargo area or passenger compartment.
- Keep your car tuned and your tires properly inflated.
- Avoid traveling during rush hours to reduce fuel consumption in stop and go traffic.
- Use your air conditioner sparingly.

The Weights and Measures Program responds to complaints about motor fuel and can be reached at (360) 902-1857 or at wtsmeasures@agr.wa.gov. The cities of Seattle and Spokane also have weights and measures programs. To contact Seattle's program, call (206) 386-1298. For Spokane, call (509) 625-6611.

AAA publishes public-service information on car care, fuel economy, and safety. You can visit your local AAA club or their Web site, <http://www.aaa.com> for more information.

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